

Truants' parents called to court

"It's too bad we have to bring these people in to tell them how important education is," says Family Court Chief Judge Jeremiah S. Jeremiah Jr.

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PROVIDENCE — The parents of nearly 90 elementary school children from four communities were summoned to Family Court yesterday to explain to judges why their children were habitually absent during the last school year.

About half of the parents summoned actually appeared in court, where some offered excuses such as: the nearest bus stop is two streets away; my child is allergic to pollen; the child's mother is disabled.

"None of these justify a child not going to school," said Family Court Chief Justice Jeremiah S. Jeremiah Jr. "We sometimes think that parents don't consider us to be serious in our mission to give children an education."

Family Court is charged with enforcing the state law requiring education for children up to 16, and its judges have the authority to fine parents \$50 for each day a child is absent. Parents whose children miss more than 30 days of school can be jailed for up to six months, though Jeremiah said that the court's interest is in ensuring that children get educated, not in fining and jailing people.

Yesterday's summons was the second notice for these parents, who were from Providence, Cranston, Central Falls and Johnston. They all had a chance to avoid court by responding to a notice to attend a "general assembly" last month, where judges, magistrates, and counselors explained the importance of education to a large group of parents with habitually absent children.

Those who failed to attend the

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session last month were called into court yesterday; those who failed to attend yesterday will receive another summons to report to Family Court in September. If they ignore that notice, Family Court judges may issue bench warrants for their arrests.

"It's too bad we have to do it," Jeremiah said. "It's too bad we have to bring these people in to tell them how important education is." Jeremiah said that the costs of not educating a child are too high to ignore: an estimated \$1.7 million to \$2.3 million over the life of a school dropout for welfare costs and other social services.

The dozens of parents who did appear in court yesterday must return on Oct. 16 for pretrial hearings. If their children are faithfully attending school this year, those cases may be dismissed, said Family Court Judge Paul A. Suttell, who also held truancy hearings yesterday.

Parents whose children don't attend school this year may find themselves spending Saturdays at court-required counseling sessions at the Community College of Rhode Island. The Family Court recently obtained a \$950,000 federal grant for a program that will require parents of habitually absent children to report to court on four consecutive Saturdays; they'll be bused from court to CCRI for a six-hour day of group and individual counseling.

Suttell found one case yesterday "where a child may be entitled to home instruction because of health problems, and I don't think the parents were aware of that."

Mary Archibald, a social worker for the Providence School Department, attended yesterday's hearing to determine why parents weren't sending their students to Providence's elementary schools, and how to help solve their problems.

Transportation to out-of-neighborhood schools seemed to be a problem for many, Archibald said, and she will work on that with parents when she meets them again. "They were all very nice," Archibald said of the parents she spoke with yesterday. "Sometimes they're angry because they have to come to court."

Yesterday's summonses were the first addressed to parents of elementary school children. Family Court magistrates operate truancy courts in 20 of the state's middle schools and in Hope High School. In their first year of operation, the truancy courts boosted the attendance rates of children brought before them from 49 percent to 89 percent.

"It's a novel program, but let me tell you, it has been recog-